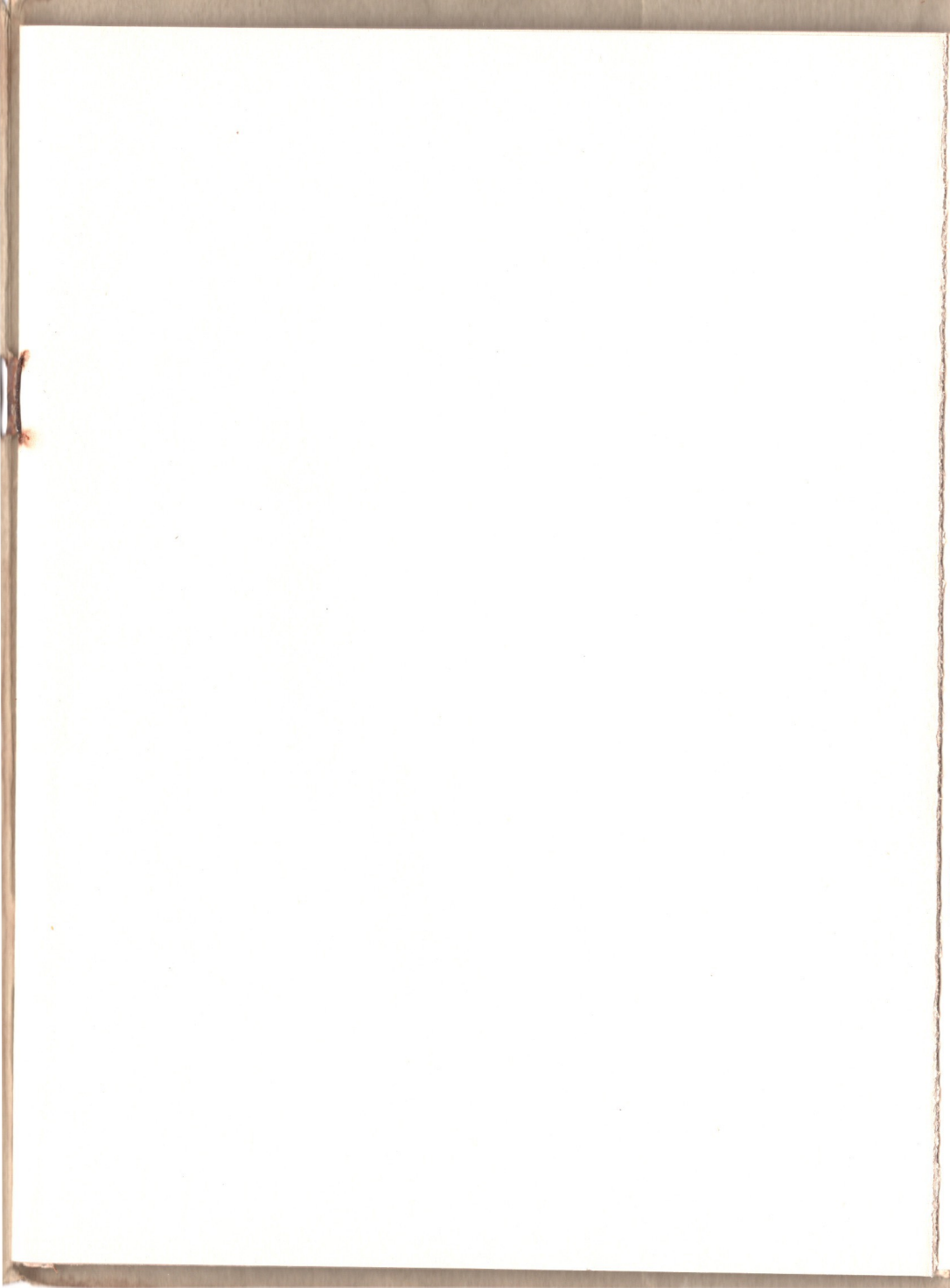




THE STORY
of THE
CHARTER
OAK





T H E S T O R Y

of T H E

C H A R T E R

O A K



FROM THE PAINTING BY C. D'WOLF BROWNELL

*Framed in wood from the Charter Oak, it now hangs in the
Wadsworth Atheneum at Hartford, Connecticut.*

THE STORY
of THE
CHARTER
OAK

BY COLIN SIMKIN

*ILLUSTRATED BY
MORTON C. HANSEN*



HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT
MCMXXXVIII





Chapter I

THE TREE

ON THE SOUTH BANK OF THE Little River, not far from where it joins the Connecticut, is an attractive knoll which once commanded an extensive view in all directions. In 1636 William Gibbons, steward to George Wyllys, came to Hartford with the frame of a house and twenty workmen to prepare a home for his master's later occupancy. He selected this beautiful site. In the course of clearing it, he came upon a magnificent specimen of the white oak. It was already six or seven hundred years old, yet seemingly hardly past its prime.

The Suckiauke Indians, who took their tribal name from the black earth of the meadows along the Connecticut River, came to Gibbons and asked that the big oak be left standing. Under it they had held their councils for many years. It was a valuable landmark in travel by land or water. When its leaves were as big as a mouse's ear they knew it was time to plant their corn. By it they had kept the records of the great floods. Sequassen, their leader, said that according to tradition, the "Peace Tree" had been planted by the Great Sachem and that as a promise of peace, tomahawks had been buried with the acorn. The tree was spared.





Chapter II

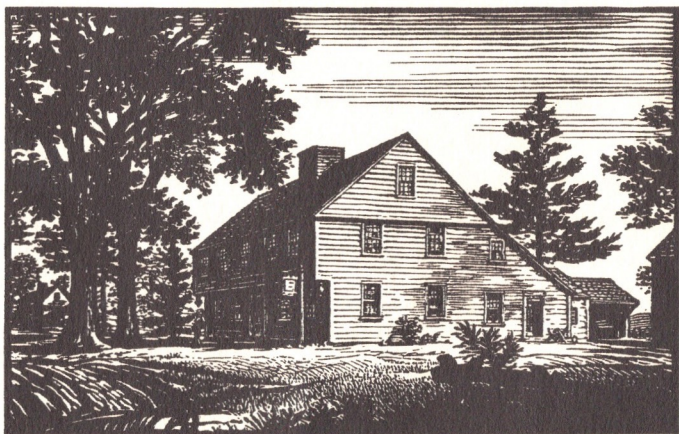
THE CHARTER

IN ORDER FULLY TO APPRECIATE the reverence with which the Charter Oak came to be regarded, it is necessary to review the events leading up to the incident in which it played such an important part.

The Pilgrims came to this country in 1620 to enjoy religious freedom. Having had a taste of that, a group led by Thomas Hooker decided that they would in addition, have political freedom. They broke away from the mother colony of Massachusetts and in what was probably the

first phase of westward emigration started off through the woods. They reached the Connecticut River in June 1636, after a two weeks' journey which can now be made in as many hours.

On January 14th, 1639, the men of Connecticut Colony met for the purpose of framing a permanent constitution for their government. Influenced by Hooker's doctrine that "the foundation of authority is laid firstly in the free consent of the people," they adopted eleven articles known as the Fundamental Orders. This was the first written constitution in history. Its principles of liberty and equality are reflected not only in the





Declaration of Independence, but also in the Constitution of the United States. Lincoln's "of the people, by the people, for the people" is a restatement of the same principle. Connecticut is rightly called the "Constitution State" and Hartford the "Birthplace of American Democracy."

Character and ability instead of the accident of birth became the basis of leadership. The independent government which they had created,

functioned to the complete satisfaction of the people who had designed it. To preserve it, they decided to get a charter from the King, recognizing their right to self-government. They also wanted their boundaries defined and their other privileges and rights confirmed. The accession of Charles II gave them the favorable opportunity for which they had patiently waited.

At a meeting held in Hartford, March 14th, 1661, it was decided to prepare a petition for presentation to the King. Governor John Winthrop was chosen to go with it to England. With five hundred pounds expense money he sailed from



Hartford to New Amsterdam (New York); from there on July 23rd he set sail on the *De Trouw*.

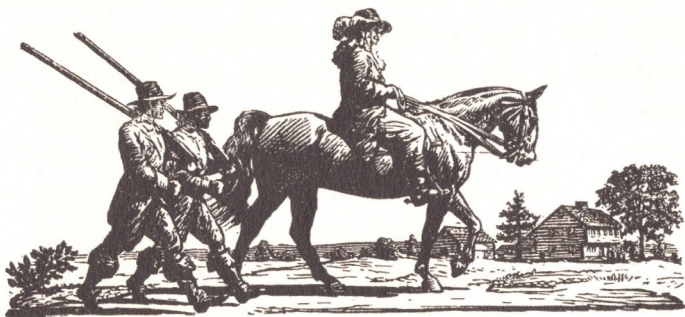
By autumn he was in London where his diplomacy and winning manners secured for him a friendly audience. He gained favor with the King by presenting to him a ring which had been given by the king's father to Winthrop's grandmother. Upon another occasion, at one of the conferences, someone showed Charles II a pine-tree shilling which had been minted in New England. The quick-witted Winthrop turned this to advantage by saying that the likeness of the tree on the coin must have been placed there in honor of the Royal Oak of Boscobel in which His Highness had taken refuge when pursued by Cromwell's men.

This further pleased the king who finally granted the charter on May 10th, 1662. Winthrop had an extra copy made and sent it home.

Under the charter, the colony of Connecticut extended from Narrogancett Bay on the East to the South Sea on the West. On a present map this would include parts of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada and California. This was a matter of much dispute for many years.

After the Revolution, when the land was ceded to the United States, the controversy ended. Connecticut did, however, reserve a tract on Lake Erie which it later sold in 1795 for \$1,200,000. The proceeds of the sale of that part of Ohio known as the Connecticut or Western Reserve, were used in the establishment of a school fund.

All went well under the document which Cotton Mather called "the freest Charter under the cope of Heaven," until, twenty-three years after granting it, Charles II died.



Chapter III

GOVERNOR ANDROS

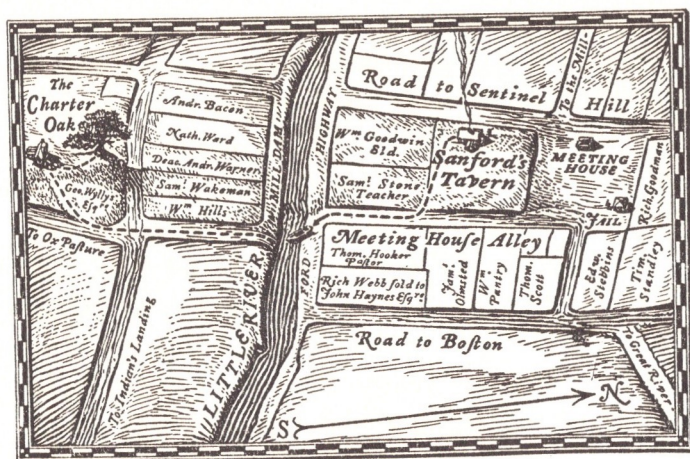
JAMES II COULD NOT TOLERATE THE independence of the colonies as had his predecessor, and one of his first official moves was to take action against Connecticut. In 1686 he sent Sir Edmund Andros to Boston to consolidate the colonies and become Governor of New England.

Andros had met with resistance in 1675 when he tried to annex the western part of Connecticut to New York, of which he was then Governor. His

defeat in this matter still rankled and he welcomed the opportunity to assume authority over the defiant colony. Arriving from England on December 19th, 1686, he lost no time in making known his demands. His letter to Governor Treat, asking for the charter, was dated December 22nd.

Governor Treat, with diplomatic skill, corresponded with Andros at length, but upon one pretext or another, deferred surrendering the precious document. Governor Andros seeing at last the futility of written demands, finally decided to go to Hartford in person with sufficient forces to seize the Charter and take over the government of the colony.

On Wednesday, October 26th, 1687, according to a diary of the period, "His Excellency with sundry of the Council, Justices and other Gentlemen, four Blew-Coats, two Trumpeters, Sam Bligh one, 15 or 20 Red-Coats with small Guns and short Lances in the Tops of them, set forth in order to goe to Connecticut to assume the Government of that place."



Chapter IV

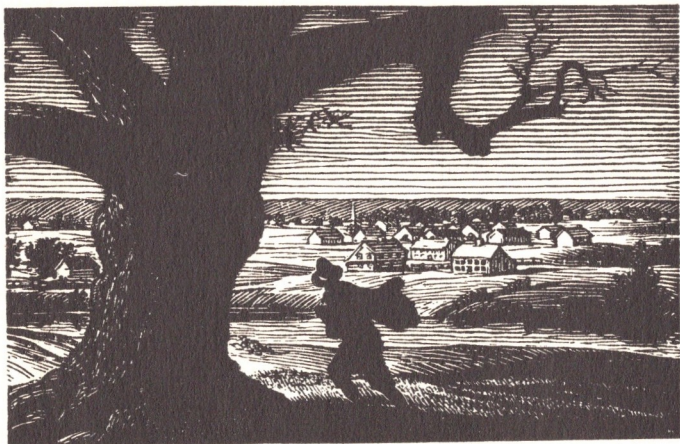
THE DISAPPEARANCE

FIVE DAYS LATER, ON MONDAY October 31st, 1687, Andros and his party arrived at Hartford, having crossed the river by ferry at Wethersfield where they were met by a troop of horse. They were escorted with much ceremony for the last few miles of their journey. At Hartford, Andros found the

train-bands drawn up to give him the honor due his position. Some historians claim that Andros called a meeting that night; others that he waited until the next day. In the absence of conclusive evidence, it is easy to assume that the impatient Andros, having been put off for ten months, came to the point of his mission at once. On the other hand, Andros must have been fatigued by his thirty-eight mile ride on horseback from Norwich, and may well have waited until the following day before calling the meeting.

The latter assumption gives credence to the





story that Governor Treat and his associates pleaded their case eloquently and passionately throughout the day, prolonging the discussion until dark so that candles had to be brought into the room.

In either event, Andros finally demanded the charter which was thereupon brought in and placed before him on the table. Before he could lay hands upon it, all of the lights, by some pre-arranged signal, were suddenly extinguished. Striking a light took time and there was a considerable interval of darkness. When at last the candles were re-lighted, the charter was gone.

Captain Joseph Wadsworth, who was stationed under a window outside of the meeting room, received the charter from a fellow conspirator. He lost no time in carrying it to the Wyllys house where it was decided to hide it in the hollow of the great oak tree on the estate. Thus an oak tree preserved the charter, even as another oak had protected the King who granted it.

In 1689, when the revolution in England removed Andros' authority, the charter was brought out of hiding and government under its provisions resumed. It served until the thirteen original colonies became the United States.



Chapter v

THE FALL OF CHARTER OAK

IT WAS NOT UNTIL 1715, OR NEARLY thirty years after the episode, that the General Court "upon consideration of faithful and good service, especially in securing the duplicate Charter of this Colony in a very troublesome season when our Constitution was struck at, and in safety keeping and preserving the same ever since unto this day" voted the sum of twenty shillings to Captain Joseph Wadsworth.

It must have been still later that the citizens began to honor the tree for the part it had played. It is pleasant, even if not authenticated, to imagine that Washington paid a visit to the tree;

and that Lafayette, and Rochambeau and their troops who camped near it received inspiration from the leafy shrine.

One of the earliest comments on the tree is contained in a letter dated 1791, from a young woman who mentioned a visit to it during a stay in Hartford.

After nearly two hundred years in the Wyllys family, the estate upon which the tree stood passed into the hands of Stephen Bulkeley. Upon his death in 1840, it became the home of his daughter and her husband, Isaac W. Stuart, who devoted much time and effort to the preservation of the aging oak. Mr. Stuart had a substantial door fitted over the opening and put tin caps over the stumps of broken branches. By that time its fame had spread so that it was a point of interest to every visitor. Dickens while visiting the Stuarts in 1842 exhibited a great interest in the tree and its story. In 1848 Harper's Magazine mentioned it in an article on American Historical Trees.

A fire was started in the hollow of the trunk by some boys who were suspected of throwing fire-crackers into the opening. Instead of harming the tree, this seemed to burn out the dead wood and



leave it in a healthier condition, for it threw out unusually luxuriant foliage the following year.

On September 22nd, 1854, several New Haven fire departments were visiting Hartford. A visit to the Charter Oak was part of the program. Twenty-four men of one company stood inside the trunk. Another company managed to squeeze in twenty-eight men!

But even the hardiest of trees must yield at last to the pressure of age, and thus did the Charter Oak at a quarter before one on the morning of August 21, 1856 when with a prodigious sigh it laid its head back on the earth from which it had sprung.

At daybreak, the news spread and the city mourned. The Stars and Stripes were draped over the hallowed stump—the modern symbol of liberty honoring an ancestor. Colt's Armory Band assembled and played anthems and funeral dirges over the prostrate patriarch.

Quietly, reverently, stood little groups about the streets—those whose freedom was a heritage and those whose freedom had been but recently acquired on their arrival in this country. And sentiment misted the eyes of both when at sundown the bells of the city tolled the death of Freedom's Friend.

Well done thou good and faithful servant!



Chapter VI

HISTORICAL NOTES

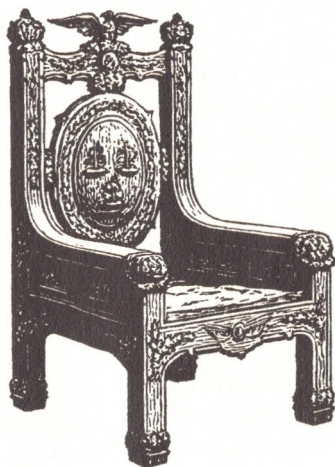
IT WAS CUSTOMARY EVEN AS FAR BACK AS the seventeenth century to make important documents in duplicate. The hazards of transportation often made it advisable to send copies by different routes to insure the safe arrival of one. There were two copies of the charter; each a duplicate of the other; each a legal document. Winthrop sent one copy home to the colonists. The other, he may have placed in the keeping of friends in England to be available in case there was cause to refer to it in that country.

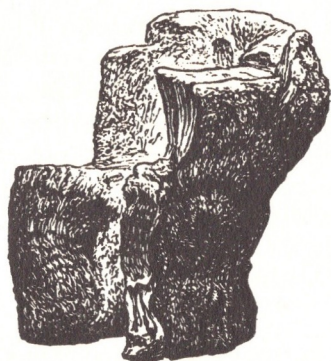
One copy is now enshrined in the State Library at Hartford, framed in the wood of the tree which protected it more than two and one-half centuries ago.

John Boyd, a pupil at the Hartford Grammar School in 1817, boarded at the home of Rev. Dr. Flint of the South Church. Coming in from school one day, he noticed Mrs. Bissell, the doctor's mother-in-law, making a bonnet stiffener out of a piece of old parchment. Inquiry disclosed that it had been given to her by a Mrs. Wyllys. Boyd exchanged a piece of cardboard for the parchment. These fragments of the other copy of the Charter now rest in Connecticut Historical Society Museum.

* * * *

The Sanford Tavern, to which Sir Edmund Andros came on his official visit to Hartford, contained a chamber for the meeting of the court. The site of this tavern is now occupied by the Home Office of The Travelers Insurance Company which very fittingly chose as the name for one of its





subsidiaries, The Charter Oak Fire Insurance Company. One-half mile south, on Charter Oak Avenue (known as Charter Street until the oak fell) a tablet marks the spot where the famous tree stood.

* * * *

Of the town meeting, of which Hartford's government formed the earliest example, Jefferson said, "It is the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government and for its preservation."

* * * *

Thomas Hooker's sermon on political liberty, which eventually led to the adoption of the Fundamental Orders, was preached in the spring of 1638. His text was from Deuteronomy, the first chapter, the thirteenth verse: "Take you wise men, and understanding, and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you." The gist of his sermon was as follows: "The foundation of

authority is laid firstly in the free consent of the people The choice of public magistrates belongs unto the people, by God's own allowance They who have power to appoint officers and magistrates, it is in their power, also, to set the bounds and limitations of the power and place unto which they call them The lesson is to persuade us, as God hath given us liberty to take it."

* * * *

A scion of the Charter Oak was set out in Bushnell Park by the Governor's Foot Guard on the occasion of its 100th anniversary, October 19, 1871.

* * * *

The acorn and oak leaf motif was liberally used in the design of the Connecticut State Capitol. On its eastern front the Charter Oak tree is carved in bold relief. The capitol was built by James G. Batterson, founder of The Travelers Insurance Company, whose tower is now the landmark which the oak once was.

* * * *

Through the care and judicious distribution made by Mr. Stuart, there exist many interesting relics of the Charter Oak. There is the Governor's chair in the State Senate chamber; a chair made from part of the hollow trunk; a chair purchased by Colonel Samuel Colt; a cradle made for Colonel Colt; a section of one of the limbs in the Connecticut Historical Society Museum. A large piece in the shape of a bell yoke was sent to Philadelphia. Every Grand Commander of the Knights Templar of New York State since 1858 has worn as his badge of office a cross made from

pieces of the Charter Oak. Many pieces of furniture were made and exhibited at the Centennial in Philadelphia in 1876; among them, a piano, a bureau and a center-table; other novelties such as two large goblets, five canes, six napkin rings, four card cases, four whist counters, a rustic mantel ornament, a wooden ham, a rustic chess table with oak chessmen, and innumerable wooden nutmegs. Many families are the proud possessors of authenticated leaves, acorns, twigs, branches or pieces of the historic tree.

* * * *

*"The Royal Oak it was the tree
That saved his royal majesty
The Charter Oak it was the tree
That saved the people's liberty."*

From an old New England primer.

* * * *

A three-cent commemorative stamp, bearing an illustration of the Charter Oak, was issued in 1935, the year of Connecticut's three-hundredth anniversary.

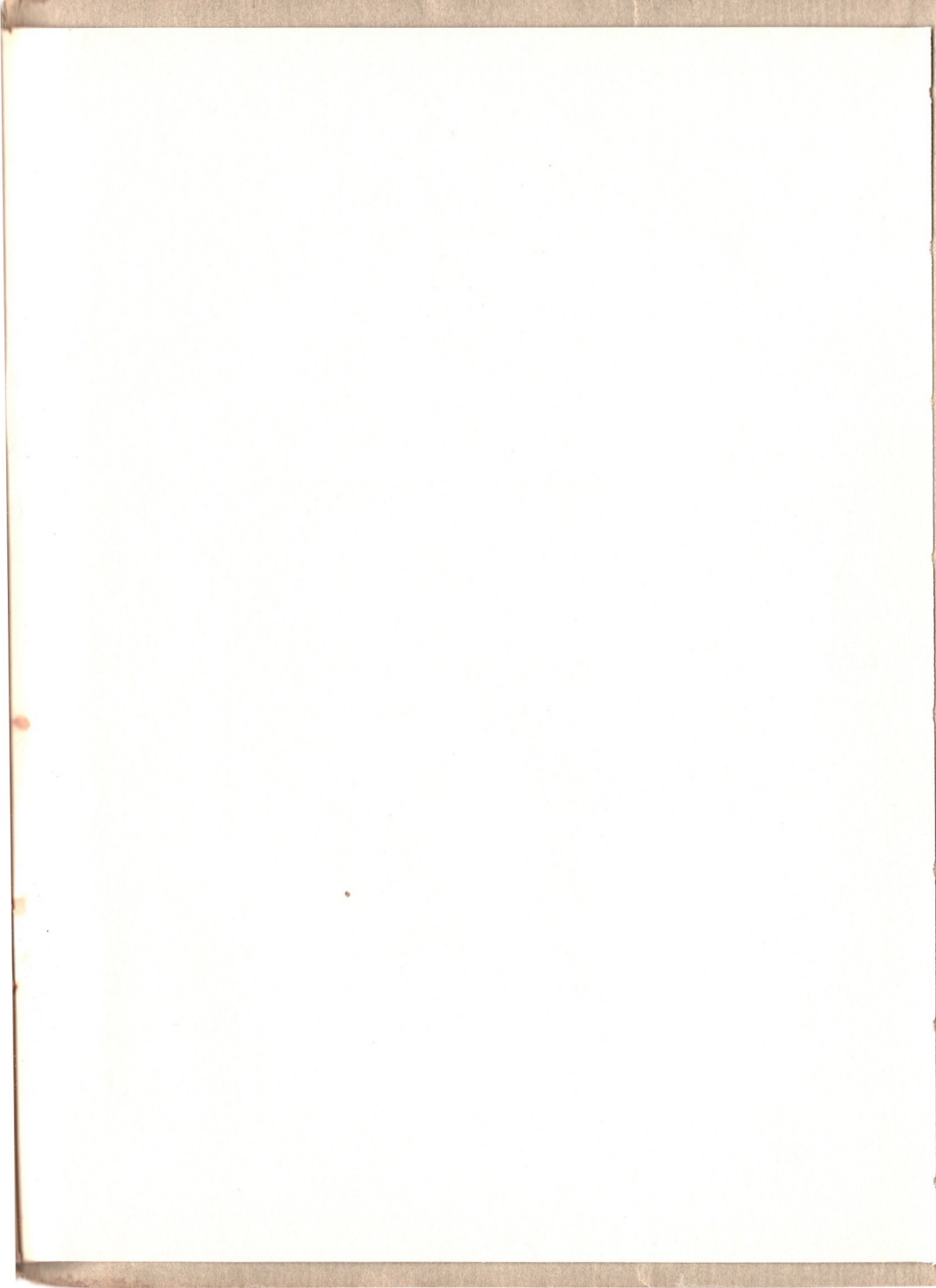
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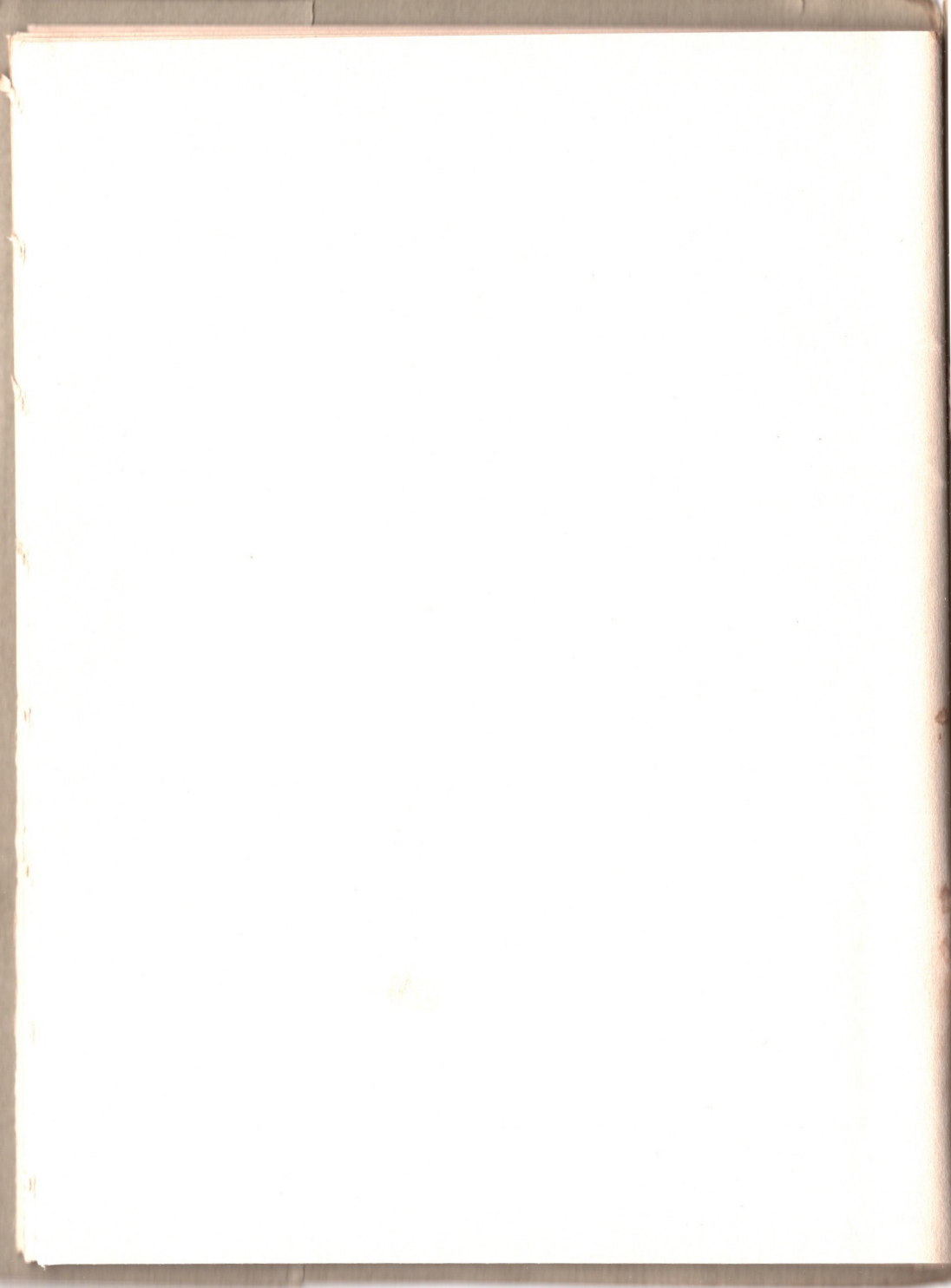


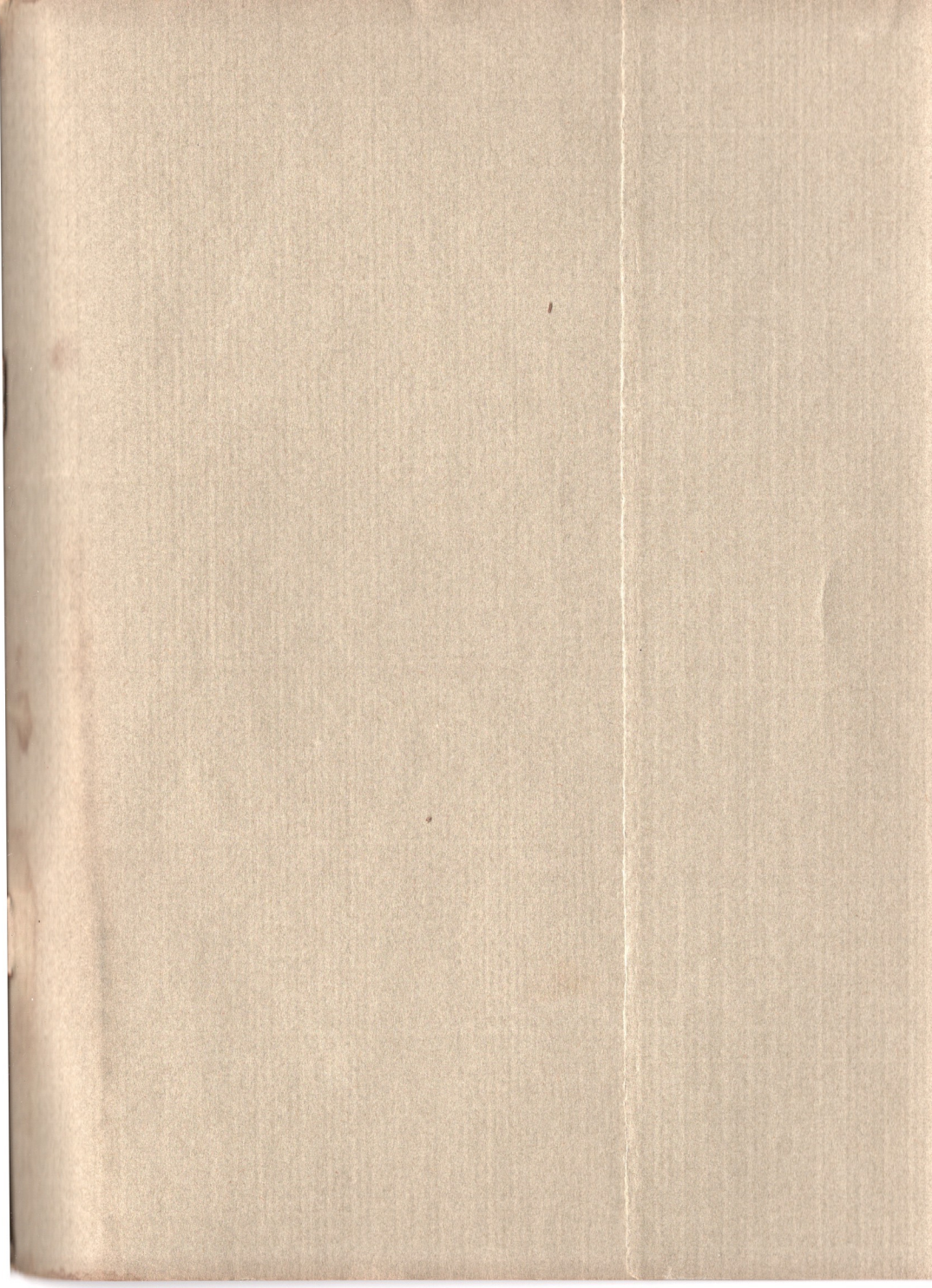
*This copy is
one of a small edition
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INSURANCE COMPANY
of HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

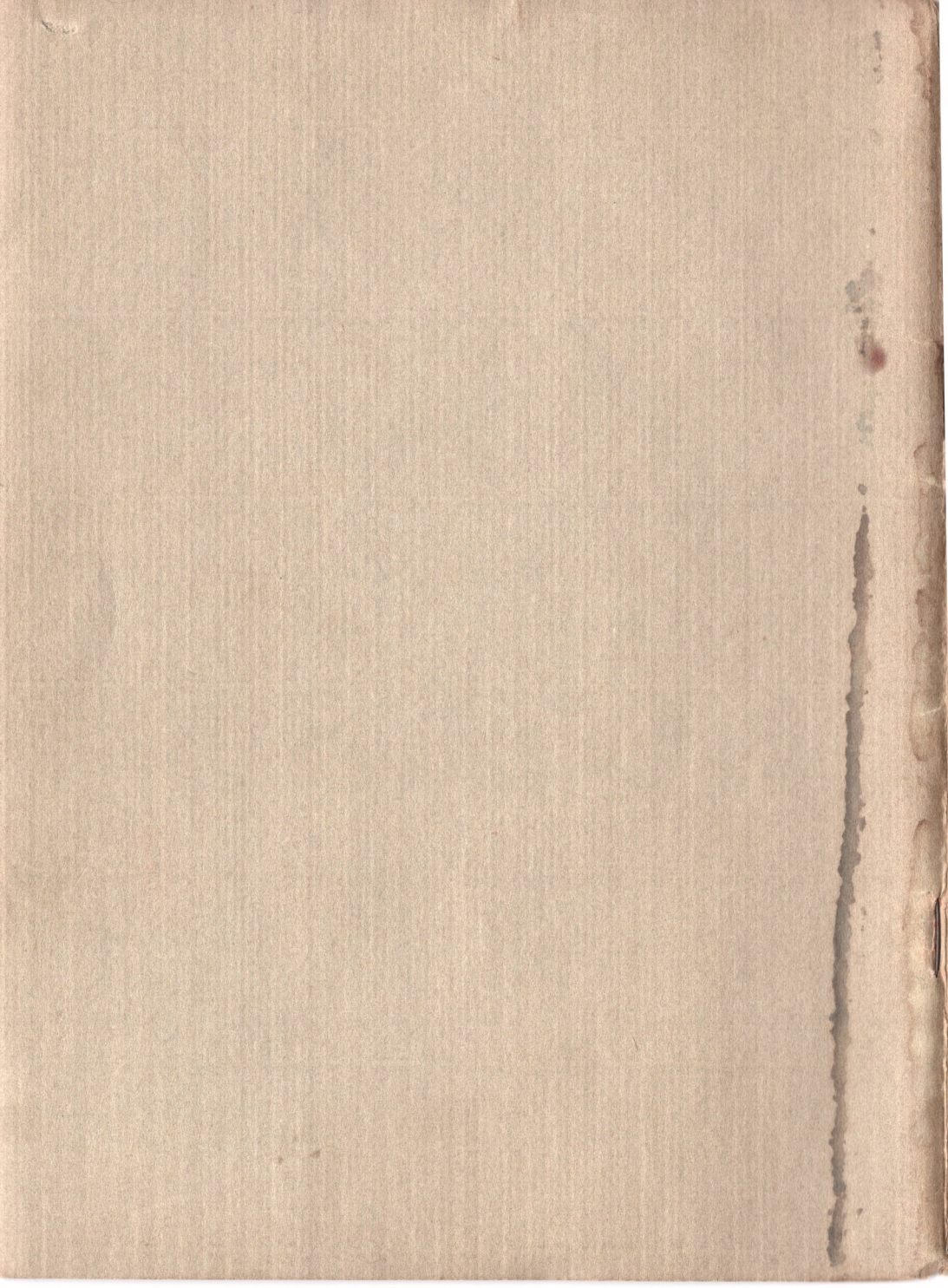


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Simkin Colin. 1938. The Story of the Charter Oak.
Hartford Connecticut: publisher not identified.

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